

Pink light and green ink by OrangeLovePerson

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Romance

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-06-19 13:39:17

Updated: 2018-06-19 13:39:17

Packaged: 2019-12-16 23:26:10

Rating: K +

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,227

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: It's 1985, and an unexpected noise in school brings back some bad memories for El.

Pink light and green ink

A.N.: Hi guys. Not entirely happy about this, to be honest, but I think I'm gonna go ahead and post it anyway. I hope you have a nice week! Bye! :)

(PS: Oh, btw, Mr. Clarke's presence in this story is based on the fact that I'd love for him to become their AV club teacher in High school, too. I know, it doesn't seem all that likely, but it would be sweet.)

"What do you mean, you don't know where she went?!"

"Geez, Mike, calm down!", Dustin exclaimed, keeping up with his friend's fast pacing.

"I had no idea she would freak out like that. Would you have seen that coming?", Lucas muttered, meeting Dustin's eyes helplessly, who could only shake his head.

"Mike, you know how she gets...", Dustin tried yet again to reason with him, but Mike wouldn't have any of it.

"Exactly, and so should you!"

But Mike's annoyed expression also turned a little ashamed at being so reproachful, and as they turned around the next corner, only to stare into yet another empty school corridor, the three of them slowed down in their tracks.

She wasn't here. Wherever she was, she was probably hiding, and not just pointlessly wandering around in some hallway, like they were doing. Maybe she wasn't even in school any longer, right now.

It had happened somewhere around their eighth and last school period, just before they'd normally all have their AV club meeting together. Luckily for them, Mr. Clarke had an appointment today, which gave them some extra time to solve their problem... But after looking for El for almost fifty minutes now they'd still found nothing.

There had been this loud, distantly familiar sound during their last period: - BEEP – BEEP – BEEP – BEEP - -

And then, from some of the hallways shining right into the classrooms, red blinking lights were engulfing their tables and boards and walls in pale pink lightening.

And that's when everyone was crawling under desks and chairs, or holding on to some sort of pole or door frame, like they'd been taught to do in those situations. But El hadn't been prepared for this at all, and something inside of her head must have snapped.

Other people had been nervous, or close to tears, even – some had feared that this was an actual nuclear attack. Most students, though, had been less anxious, knowing that it was in all likelihood just another test alarm.

But Lucas, who had just had "Home economics" with El, saw her leave the classroom, looking confused and slightly terrified. And now they still couldn't find her.

"How could we not have seen this coming?", Mike muttered, looking quite miserable and lost to his friends. He dropped down on one of the stairs close to them.

"It's just not something that happens very often, these alarms.", Lucas argued, sitting down next to Mike.

"Yeah, and Hopper's the head of police. You'd think, if anything, he'd be the one to warn her about this stuff. To make sure she doesn't panic.", Dustin pointed out.

"What does Hopper's job have to do with any of this?", Lucas wondered, sceptical.

"I don't know, isn't that the sort of thing that cops think about a lot? Politics, and stuff?"

Right then, Max and Will came bursting through one of the wing doors leading to the Physics classrooms.

"Nothing?", Lucas asked Max, disappointed.

"Nope. What about you guys?"

"Well, she's not here right now, is she?", Mike almost snarled back. Max raised an eyebrow at him.

"Sorry.", he muttered, running a palm through his hair in annoyance.

This was all so damned stupid. If he'd only told El about this. But it had never come up!

It should have come up.

Why had Mike never mentioned those alarms, and how they were harmless and just a practise in most cases? He tried to remember whether or not they'd talked about *fire* alarms, at least, which were pretty similar in the way they sounded, yet different in the way everyone was supposed to react, but he wasn't sure if that had been a subject between them, either. Would it even have mattered if they'd discussed this stuff or not? Would she have freaked out, anyway?

El had told Mike about the day she'd opened the gate:

She told him about how scared she'd been, and how guilty and horrible she'd felt.

"I didn't want to touch it. The Demogorgon.", she'd said, looking like she was afraid he wouldn't believe her.

"I know! Of course you didn't.", he had assured her, quickly.

"But I had to."

He had frowned. "You had to?"

She'd nodded, looking for a way to explain. "Touching things makes them go away. It always worked, before."

"In the black room, you mean? You stop seeing things when you touch them?"

Another nod.

"But it didn't work that day.", he stated, questioningly. El's eyelids had fluttered down then, she was breathing through her mouth rather quickly

and looking scared at the mere memory, even after all this time. "Hey, it's okay.", he'd told her, rubbing her forearm gently until she'd calmed back down enough to meet his eyes.

"You were only trying to make it vanish, then?", he asked her, softly, still curious. She frowned.

"Vanish?"

"That means "disappear". You wanted it to go away, the monster? But it didn't?"

El shook her head, her eyes looking like shiny, brown marbles. "Turned around."

She had shown Mike how she'd done it; lightly touching her fingertip to his shoulder.

He hadn't felt much, then (- well, except for the tingly sort of feelings he always got when she touched him, or something, but that was besides the point). And yet, that small movement had been enough to make the Demagorgon notice El. Mike could picture the entire horrible thing in his head: how the monster had breathed on her, his garbled, alien face looming right in front of El, and she must have been so, so horrified.

Mike had seen that look in her eyes when she'd talked about all of this, he'd seen her pupils widen and her jaw stiffen and her skin become paler than usual. So he knew. He knew that the crack, the gate between the Upside Down and the normal world had been the result of people like "Papa" pushing El too far, scaring her too much, underestimating her and all else they were dealing with. Everything was entirely their fault.

They'd been risking her safety on a daily basis! Everyone's safety.

These people hadn't known what they were doing. They hadn't had the faintest, tiniest idea of what they were really doing there, messing around with other dimensions and all that. But they'd dragged her right into this chaos, so much so that she'd believed to be blameable for it.

Mike sighed, breaking away from those thoughts and the upcoming anger they inevitably caused. This wasn't helping them right now, they needed to find El, needed to see if she was okay...

The red lights in the lab, though. The noises, the screams, and the beeping sounds.

Maybe the alarm today had been a bit like all of that. Maybe she'd remembered something from the day she fled. And maybe she'd panicked again.

Mike couldn't stand to think of it, couldn't stand this entire situation right now. Somewhere in this building, or, hell, maybe somewhere in this town, El was probably hiding. They'd looked in all of the locker rooms, the broom closets, the library,...

What if she'd run into the woods?

Oh god, what if she had? They'd never find her! She was good at hiding, and these woods were gigantic. She'd hid there before already, in winter last year... For *weeks* she'd been hiding in the woods.

If El really thought she needed to hide, she might be gone for days.

And it wasn't just Mike's concern for El's immediate safety, either. It was all that could follow a situation like this, too. People talked.

What if Lucas wasn't the only one who'd seen El leave the classroom? He'd said that everyone had been busy and not really paying attention, but how could he know for sure? What if someone else had also seen El look so upset, and would now start paying more attention to her as a result? What if El had used her powers in some way, on her way out?

"I'm gonna look in the gym once more.", Dustin decided. He stood up and nodded at the others, looking determined. "We'll find her, she can't be that far away."

Lucas nodded. "I'll go with you."

When they were gone, only Will, Mike and Max remained. Will

cleared his throat.

"Mike, I... I need to go to the parking lot, tell my Mum what's going on. She'll go nuts if I'm still not there in a few minutes."

"Oh. Oh, sure, you should do that...", Mike replied, distractedly. He hadn't even paid attention to the time, but it made sense that Will would have. His Mum always became nervous when it took Will longer than usual to make his way out of school.

"Maybe you shouldn't mention that El's gone. Make up some excuse instead.", Max suggested, frowning. She'd leaned against some lockers opposite to the stairs, sliding to the floor with her knees in front of her. "Your Mum is going to contact the chief otherwise, Will."

"Would that be a bad thing?", Will questioned, uncertain.

Mike wasn't sure, either. The part of him that always wanted to make Hopper trust him with El found the mere idea of informing the chief pretty devastating. But mostly, he just wanted El back as soon as possible, and the longer she was away the longer they'd all worry like crazy. So they really needed as much help as they could get. Besides, Hopper would probably shout the shit out of them all if he'd later find out that they'd kept something so important secret from him. He was her Dad, after all.

"We should let Hopper know, I guess.", Mike concluded, before standing up and making his way up the stairs.

"Where are you going?", Max asked, frowning.

"Maybe she's in one of the classrooms on second floor, or something... I'm gonna check."

He sounded hopeless even to his own ears.

Will's steps were quick as he walked across the mostly deserted parking lot. His Mum was standing next to her car, looking relieved when she saw him.

"Oh, there you are! I was starting to worry.", she said, rolling her eyes

at herself and laughing, the burning cigarette in her hand creating a tiny loop in the air. "Is everything alright?", she then asked, frowning slightly at the sight of his frustrated expression.

"Yes...", Will started, then shook his head. "I mean, no.. There was this test alarm today, Mum, and now...- Wait, what is Steve doing in your car?"

Will's Mum turned around, looking surprised for a second herself, as if only now remembering that fact, but then she laughed.

"Oh, right! You see, he was waiting for your friend Dustin over there, we started talking, and apparently his car radio is broken! I told him he can just sit in our car for a while. He wanted to listen to some radio show he likes, I think..."

"Hi Will!", came Steve's muffled voice through the glass, and Will waved at the older boy, still a little confused.

"Erm. Okay..."

It seemed weird that Steve would feel so comfortable around his Mum, Will thought, considering that she was also Jonathan's Mum. And Jonathan was now together with Nancy. Who was Steve's ex-girlfriend.

(Alright, this was way too complicated for Will to really want to know the details. If he were a little younger, he'd probably tell himself something along the lines of "*Teenagers are so weird!*", right now.)

Right then, the car door opened, and his Mum – a little befuddled - quickly stepped aside so Steve could climb out. "Hi Will.", he repeated, his smile charming and his hair the usual, pseudo-chaotic glory. "Hey, you don't happen to know where Dustin is? I've got some pretty drastic news..."

Will just shook his head. "He might be in the gym with Lucas... We're searching for El."

His mum shot him a confused look, and Will sighed. "A test alarm went off today, and we think El might be hiding somewhere now.

Lucas says he saw her hurry out of the classroom, she looked pretty scared..."

Will's Mum heaved out a breath. "Oh, the poor thing.", she said, looking worried.

"Actually, that's exactly what I wanted to talk to Dustin about.", Steve quipped in, to their surprise. "He's in the gym, you said?"

"El?", Mike shouted, opening yet another classroom door. "El, are you here?"

"Mike?", a familiar voice said, and he turned around, a little startled. "Is that you?"

"Mr. Clarke?", Mike uttered, staring at his AV club teacher. Mr. Clarke stood in the doorway, his bag dangling down to his side and his reading glasses up on his forehead. He seemed surprised to find Mike here, but not angry.

"Heh-hey, what are you doing here at this hour, Mike? Are you and the others playing hide-and-seek?", Mr. Clarke joked, raising an eyebrow at the boy.

"What? No we- I'm.- we aren't.", Mike stuttered, a little helpless. "I'm sorry, Sir, the lights were off, so I thought everyone was gone. I didn't know you'd still be here, uh..."

"It's alright, Mike! I'm just curious, that's all.", Mr. Clarke assured him, smiling. "I heard your voice, are you looking for something?"

Mike tried hard to seem casual.

"Oh, uhm, yes. I'm just looking for my... friend..."

"Who, Dustin? Will? I think I saw them a couple minutes ago..."

"No, I meant... not a real friend, more like a ...robot."

Oh, give me a break!, Mike thought. Why had he said that? Saying that only raised more questions. Where would he even get a robot from?

"I've been searching for my robot.", he repeated, with slightly more confidence this time. Mr. Clarke's smile turned wide.

"Really? You kids build a robot? *That's* your contribution to this year's 20th jubilee of the local "Hawkins High" science competition?"

An awkward silence followed, in which Mike slowly blinked. "Yes."

"Mike, that's fantastic!"

Mike cursed himself inwardly. Great, now they'd have to figure out how to build a robot, on top of everything else...

"We're not entirely sure how it works yet.", he hurried to say. "Also, as you can see, we lost it, so..."

"Alright, I won't raise my expectations too high. But I'm sure you kids will figure something out!"

Mr. Clarke looked around the room they had just entered. "Do you want me to help you find it? How big is this project, anyway?"

"Oh, no, it's alright, I'm sure I'll be okay!", Mike assured his former teacher, faking a winning smile. "Thank you, though, Mr. Clarke."

"I see. Well then, see you next Tuesday, Mike."

"Goodbye!"

Mr. Clarke nodded, and with a little waving gesture, he was gone. His shoes were making small sounds as he stepped down the corridor, away from the room.

Mike sighed in relief, only to feel crashed by another wave of misery again. El was still nowhere to be seen... He'd better try find the others, so they could ride their bikes to the police station and talk to Hopper about the bad news. In case he hadn't heard it all from Will's Mum already. Also, El might be at the cabin, or something. Or they might really have to look in the forest for her, after all.

Whenever something like this happened – whenever there was danger that El might seem slightly as unusual as she really was to

people, Mike felt his insides clench in that painful, gut-shakingly scary way. Every time someone looked at El for a second too long, or a little too curious, or whenever people came up with questions he and El had never practised together, Mike became worried like a hypochondriac in a pest station.

Sometimes when she raised her eyebrows or shook her head in a confused way – because of some word she didn't quite know or some figure of speech she hadn't heard yet, Mike would look around first, nervous about who might have witnessed their talk. And if no one was looking at them in a strange way, Mike would relax, letting his shoulders sink and his brain fully process just how adorable she was being, right then, but *if* someone was looking...

If someone was noticing El's cute, but totally, totally question-raising habits, Mike would be right back to feeling on guard again.

It's not like he really minded.

It's not like his fear of losing her again could ever compete with the actual feeling of having lost her. No matter whether the hope he'd so desperately clung to, at the time, had been rewarded with the most amazing truth ever, or not. Nothing was worse than El being in danger, so Mike had every reason in the world to be a bit overprotective, at times.

A little earlier today- but not all that much – El was sitting in a huge, garage-like room full of car parts and tools.

She liked the grey TV-shows better than the ones in colour, she had decided. They looked more interesting somehow, with the funny sort of clothes and haircuts you didn't really get to see any more today all that often, in her experience. Hopper had explained to her that the grey TV-programs (the "black and white ones", he called them, although El personally thought that the word grey described this situation way better, actually) were mostly older than the colourful ones, because people were able to make everything look a lot more realistic, these days.

Of course El knew that the people on TV, the ones in the grey movies

and shows, didn't really have grey skin and grey plants and entirely grey-coloured lives.

But, weirdly enough, she didn't really mind at all that sometimes TV looked way different than reality. No one ever complained about white book pages with black ink printed on them, did they?

No one expected words like "cactus" to be printed in green ink or words like "sea" to be printed in blue ink. So what was so wrong about weird looking television?

That's what El had been thinking about, before Steve walked through the door again, a plate with a sandwich in one hand and a second sandwich in the other one, from which he'd apparently just taken a bite.

"Great TV, huh?", he commented, following her eyes. He flopped down on the couch next to her, putting the plate on the table, close to El.

"Thank you.", El said, quietly. She carefully lifted the sandwich he'd offered her to her mouth. It was very loaded with mayonnaise.

"No worries, kiddo."

He looked at the TV again, where an old movie from the sixties was playing.

"I always tried to convince my Dad to let us take this one home. Didn't get why he wanted to have the big screen here at work, instead. It's not even like he's really watching anything here, he's just lying under some car, repairing motors and seals all day."

Steve shrugged, eating some more.

"I don't know what he needs it for, he could just turn the radio on if he wants to listen to the news so badly, right?", Steve chuckled, absent-mindedly. "But anyway, now that I'm working here, too, I'm glad to have something to do in the shop. I'm watching "Jeopardy" during all my lunch breaks, it's great!"

"It's a really big screen.", El admitted with wide eyes. It might be the

biggest TV she'd ever seen, so far.

"Yep. One of the best ones on the market still, I think."

"It's bigger than Mike's TV.", she considered.

"I know.", Steve said, looking a little unhappy right then, for some reason. That didn't make a lot of sense. Maybe it had something to do with Nancy, El pondered. Mike had mentioned that Steve and Nancy used to watch a lot of movies together, back when they were dating. Maybe Steve was sad because now he had to watch all these movies alone instead? In his Dad's car repair shop, and during his lunch break?

"It's also bigger than Dustin's TV.", she assured him, trying to lighten the mood.

Steve frowned. "Hm. Not so sure about that. Dustin just got a new TV two weeks ago, you know? The old one broke while we were watching *Terminator* together." He snickered.

El was glad to hear so. Not that part about the broken device, of course. But she was glad to hear so, considering the whole dilemma with Nancy. It was good to know that Steve had found someone new to watch movies with, now that he and Nancy had broken up. That must be such a relief. She knew how boring it could get to only ever watch TV alone. It was so much more fun when Hopper had time, in the evening.

She was still pretty sure that Steve's TV was the biggest TV she'd ever seen, though, and she had to make that clear.

"Your TV is bigger than Dustin's.", El stated, calmly. "Mike's TV is *still* bigger than Dustin's, he told me, and yours is bigger than Mike's. Ergo, your TV is the biggest."

"Ergo?!", Steve laughed, for some reason finding that hilarious, it seemed.

El nodded, confused.

"*Ergo* means *therefore*.", she explained, "Didn't you know?"

Steve shook his head, still grinning. "Yes, it's just an unusual word, is all. Is Nancy still helping you with your homework and stuff, by the way?"

El frowned. Steve seemed pretty focused on Nancy still, even now that the TV problem was solved.

"Yes, sometimes. Mike is helping me, mostly." She thought about that for a moment, and about how smart Nancy and Mike both were.

"Did Nancy ever help *you* in school, Steve?", she wondered.

Steve's expression took on a slightly smug note. "Er, sort of.", he said, "But I was helping her study a lot, too, you see."

That was unexpected. Steve didn't really strike El as the sort of person who helped someone like Nancy in school. But then again, she didn't know Steve all that well. Maybe Steve was smart in his own ways. Or he was making some sort of joke El didn't get, seeing as he was grinning, right now. Or maybe a bit of both.

He took another huge bite of his sandwich.

"So, you want to tell me what you were doing, earlier, running around like that?", he asked, pointedly casual.

El sighed, eating some of her sandwich as well, mostly to play for time.

"I...- I was being stupid.", she then admitted.

The sandwich was actually quite yummy, so she took another bite.

"How were you stupid?", Steve followed.

"I ran away from school. There was danger."

"Danger?"

El nodded, frowning. "But now I think there wasn't."

Steve took a moment to process this. "Alright, what sort of danger do

you mean?"

"There was no danger.", she clarified, again. "I was just being stupid."

"Okay, but why did you think something was happening, huh? What was going on?"

"There was noise." El looked from her sandwich, to the TV, to Steve. "Like a fire was there, but there wasn't."

"Oh, okay..."

"If it had been a real fire, there would have been water, right?", El checked, needing to make sure. "From the roof?"

"You mean, those automatic fire extinguishers? The ones that shoot water from the ceiling?" Steve frowned. "Uh, I don't know if Hawkins High has those..."

That was concerning, El thought.

"So there might have been a real fire?", she wanted to know, suddenly urgent to find out what Mike and the others were doing, right now. Were they okay? Did she leave them alone when they might have needed her help?

What if there actually was a fire, a bad one maybe?! Why did she have to run away?

Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, no! What if they'd gotten hurt? What if...-

"Relax, it was probably just a test alarm.", Steve said, almost soothingly. "You know what that is?"

El shook her head.

"That's when they act like there's a fire, even though there's not.", Steve shrugged. "Just to see if everyone reacts the right way. You know, so that people know what to do if there ever *is* a real fire, one day. Get it?"

"Yes.", El said, contemplating this. So she had still been stupid, after

all.

"What do you want me to do now?", Steve asked her, friendly. "I could call Hopper, drive you to the police station, or back to school, home,..."

"Don't you have to work?", El wondered looking around the huge room and Steve's dirty overall. He'd told her that it was his job to repair cars. That sounded like a nice work. So helpful. No one needs a car that doesn't work.

"Nah. I got pretty much done this morning already. No need to stress." He stood up, swallowing the last bite of his lunch.

"Tell you what," Steve suggested, when he was mostly done with chewing, "I'll pick Dustin up from school quickly, like I told him, and you just keep hanging out back here for a little longer. We'll be back in, like, ten minutes, and then you and Dustin and I can figure out what to do, okay? We might watch a movie, or something. Or tune up his bike some more.", he shrugged.

El smiled, glad that she had met Steve here today. He really knew what to do in such cases, it seemed. Also, Dustin would probably have his walkie with him, so she could tell Mike where she was. She really hoped he wasn't angry at her for just disappearing like that...

What had she been thinking?

About an hour later, when Steve, Will, Dustin, Lucas and Max were walking hurriedly through the empty corridors of his old high school, Steve felt awkwardly old. He couldn't even really remember anymore what it had been like to be their age, feeling like he'd become an entirely different guy in the meantime.

All these classrooms and hallways... They'd been Steve's second home, last spring still. Now, the sports trophies and lockers and banners everywhere seemed odd and distant.

At fifteen, he'd cared for snogging random girls and drinking beer with idiotic people. Steve and his friends had spend their time

smoking and laughing and just talking shit all day long, basically. Steve had felt like his life had been pretty easy, at the time, and it actually had been.

But now he also saw that there were other ways of having easy teenage years, and being more like Dustin and the other little goofballs could maybe have been fun, too, come to think of it. Must be nice to stick together, like that. Have people around you who you can really trust, and who make you better, not worse. People who look out for you.

"There we go!", Dustin said, picking up his backpack from the floor and pulling his walkie out.

"Mike?", he almost shouted into the speaker. "Mike, we're at the gym, you need to come here! Steve is there, and he knows where El is! Do you copy? Over!"

Nothing.

Lucas frowned, annoyed. He took the walkie from Dustin.

"I repeat: We know where El is, Mike! Do you copy?"

The walkie hissed, brokenly, until suddenly a muffled voice came out.

"Lucas? It's Mike, are you there? Did you just say -"

"Yes, we know where she is. We're at the gym, waiting for you. Over."

"I'll be there in a sec! Over and out!"

Mike actually reached them surprisingly quickly. He came running towards them, walkie in hand.

"You know where she went?", he asked, urgently.

Steve nodded and grinned. "Relax, Mike. Uncle Steve here took care of the situation."

Mike frowned. "What?"

"She's at the car shop. Everything's fine, I saw her outside and made her calm down. No big deal." Steve shrugged. "I'd have come earlier, but I didn't think you guys would start some sort of mental search for her, so..."

"Mental?", Mike snarled, still feeling on edge, "You do realise that there's still about a million people out there who could get her into trouble again, right?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Calm down, Romeo. According to you, I just saved all your asses."

"Okay, okay, you're awesome Steve, we get it.", Lucas quipped in. "Can we go now?"

"Go?", Steve asked, "Go where, exactly?"

"To see El?", Dustin pointed out, as it was pretty obvious to him.

"What, you *all* want to come? Now?"

"Well, we didn't just hang around here for the past hour for fun, did we?", Max answered, looking like she was barely refraining from rolling her eyes. "We want to see if she's okay."

Steve sighed. "Fine, then let's go. My colleagues are probably already wondering when I'll be hosting the next eighth grader party, anyway."

"Ninth grader.", Will corrected him. "We're all in ninth grade."

"Yeah, I know.", Steve admitted, annoyed with himself for that. "Whatever."

"El.", Mike said, face going numb quite quickly as he saw her sitting there.

She looked up and blinked at him, almost expectantly. "Mike?", she answered, before jumping up. He made his way towards her and then, suddenly, they were hugging. Which was good: The last hour had been so clouded with a dozen miniature panic attacks, on his part, as well as with a bunch of distant conspiracy theories about

what might have happened, that feeling El in his arms again right now was quite the relief.

"Hey, El, where were you?", he wondered, pulling back from her far enough to look her in the eye. Mike had last seen her an hour ago. *An hour*. Why did this situation feel so familiar then? It wasn't like last time, not at all, not in any way was it like *that*, and yet...

Was he really that paranoid?

El looked a little ashamed, but at least she seemed calm. "I was...- Mike, I'm sorry for freaking out."

"What happened?"

"I... I don't know."

"Were you scared of the alarm, El?", Dustin opted helpfully, who had just stepped into the shop behind Mike, along with the others.

Mike let go of El, still standing close and holding her hand. She nodded, the embarrassed expression still visible on her face.

"Hey, El! Sorry for earlier.", Lucas said, rubbing his neck. "I probably should have followed you right away, or done something quicker..."

El shook her head, decidedly. "You didn't do anything wrong, Lucas."

"Hey look, El, we totally get it.", Max stated, sounding earnest. "Those alarms can get awfully loud sometimes, and everything must have been pretty weird for you."

"Do you think anyone saw you?", Will asked, quietly. "Anyone who could have found it odd that you ran away?"

El thought about it for a second.

"I'm not sure.", she then said.

For a moment, the room fell silent. Max eyed her solemn-looking friends in disbelief.

"Oh, come on, guys. It's not that bad! Stop frowning, who cares if anyone saw her. Teenagers are allowed to act suspicious from time to time.", she declared.

El seemed to find this really funny, somehow, because she immediately erupted in giggles. Dustin smiled at her, confused.

After that, the situation demanded a couple more sandwiches for everyone, sponsored by Steve. Will's Mum drove them all home, not much later, except for Dustin, who chose to stay a little longer, and except for Mike and Lucas, whose bikes were still at school.

"So... um," Mike started, quietly, when saying goodbye to El, "I'll call you later then, yeah?"

"On the walkie?"

He nodded, a little insecure for some reason. But then she smiled, enthusiastically, and his mouth automatically did the same.

"Okay.", she agreed, softly. He pressed her hand, quickly, before letting it slip away from his. "Okay.", he repeated, a little dumbly. He ignored the dark, harsh feeling clawing in his chest, as he left.

It was crazy and stupid to feel this... This awkward, dreadful something, when nothing had even really happened today. She'd left school a few minutes too early, they'd looked for her, they'd found her, she was fine – End of story.

So why was Mike pacing around in his room, all throughout the rest of the afternoon, barely able to finish his homework with all the anxiety clinging to his mind?

Urgh. This was ridiculous.

When the time came to crawl into the blanket fort, like he'd planned to do for the last couple hours, he pressed the button on his walkie down and turned the wheel, needing to hear her voice.

"El?"

"Mike."

He sighed. "Hey."

"Hi." , she answered.

"Are you feeling okay, El?", Mike asked, wondering how she'd explained the whole thing to Hopper, or whether Will's Mum had told him, instead. Mike wasn't sure if she'd still felt embarrassed, at the end of their meeting this afternoon. Or worse, if the sort of panic that had made El run away in the first place, had found a way back.

"Yes.", she replied. "Are *you* feeling okay?" She sounded sceptic.

Mike frowned. "Um, sure. I'm alright."

"You don't *look* alright, Mike."

He was very confused for a moment. Then he grinned, he couldn't help it.

"Wait, what? Are you watching me again, right now?"

It was silent for a moment.

"A little.", she admitted, carefully. He chuckled.

"You were so worried. Earlier.", she explained.

"Yeah, well, I'm always worried.", Mike muttered, under his breath.

"Hey, where exactly are you?", he wondered, looking around the room.

"I'm right in front of you."

"Really?"

"M-hm."

That made sense, come to think of it: She'd already told him that she mostly saw an endless, black place when she looked out for people, as well as a few surroundings of the voice she was focusing on. And

now that Mike considered this, he suddenly felt... different.

"I think...- I think I can feel you now.", he told her, softly.

"Yes?"

He nodded.

"Can you see me, too?", she wondered. Mike blinked, trying to concentrate on the direction where he believed her to be.

"I'm not sure..."

Was there something? Had the light somehow changed?

"Maybe a little.", he guessed.

"That's good." She sounded happy.

"El?"

"Yes?"

"Next time, when there's a test alarm in school, or... or something else that makes you scared, let's meet somewhere, okay? If you feel like you have to run away, can you, um...- Can you go to the huge oak tree by the gym? Or to the janitor's office? Or...-"

"Or to Steve's place again?", El suggested.

Mike thought about that. Steve had obviously reacted pretty good, today. He'd noticed her outside and calmed her down, talking to her until she'd felt less anxious. Maybe, he should thank Steve again, next time he saw him, Mike considered. Yes, Steve really deserved a "Thank you" for all of today.

"Yeah, okay. Let's meet there, El. At Steve's."

"I'm not going to run away again, Mike.", she murmured. "I was being stupid, today."

"Nothing about you is stupid, El.", he answered, gently.

"Friends don't lie."

"Exactly."

It was quiet in his barely-lit basement, just for the matter of a few heartbeats.

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for always looking for me.", she told him, voice quiet and soft and raspy, all at once.

He grinned, feeling like the shock of today was slowly leaving his body.

"Thank you for always turning up again in the end, El."

Mike could have sworn he saw her smile at him, right then.

- The End.